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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ASHGABAT 001055

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SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN: IDHR DIRECTOR AKHMEDOVA'S JULY 5-12
VISIT TO LONDON

Classified By: Charge Sylvia Reed Curran for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) SUMMARY: Institute for Democracy and Human Rights Director Shirin Akhmedova led a delegation to the UK July 5-12 to explore UK best practices in human rights, civil society regulation, and penal, judicial, and legal reform. Akhmedova told her hosts that the meetings were all very useful and made plans to continue cooperation through study visits and training seminars for Turkmenistan officials and experts. Post has plans to get Akhmedova to the United States on a similarly useful visit. Rule of law is an area where the United States has great expertise, and where we could usefully help advance reforms in this country. END SUMMARY.

12. (C/NF) Institute for Democracy and Human Rights (IDHR) Director Shirin Akhmedova traveled to London July 5-12 on a UK-sponsored trip. The official write-up on the trip was passed to us by the British Charge (please protect). First Deputy Minister of Justice Batyr Erniyazov and Deputy Chairman of the Council on Religious Affairs Nury Kurbanov were also in the delegation. The appointments were organized at the Turkmen request with the aim of developing a body of knowledge based on international covenants and instruments, including the UN Convention Against Torture and the International Convention on Civil and Political Rights. Specific aims were to further knowledge on how to improve policing and detention practices and how to reduce the incidence of torture, leading to greater adherence to the rule of law in Turkmenistan. Another goal of the visit was to support the development of human rights protection in prisons, assist in improving the penal code in Turkmenistan, obtain information to help update national legislation, learn UK best practices in human rights and civil society regulation, and investigate the functions of regulatory bodies in the UK. Particular attention was given to religious freedom and best practices in this area.

WIDE-RANGING PROGRAM

13. (C) The delegation visited HM Prison Wandsworth, the British East West Center (an NGO dealing with Russia and CIS countries), the Independent Police Complaints Commission, Ministry of Justice Human Rights Division, Home Office HM

Prison Service, House of Commons, London Metropolitan University, Prison Reform Trust, International Center for Prison Studies Kings College School of Law, Public Administration International, Charity Commission for England and Wales, the Office of the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman, National Council of Voluntary Organizations, Ministry of Justice Deputy Chief Inspector of Prisons, the Foreign Office, and the International Bar Association. The delegation told their British hosts that they found the meetings to be very useful. The Turkmen were most interested in issues such as penal, judicial, and legal reform. Nevertheless, they expressed a desire for Turkmenistan to make progress in all human rights areas.

14. (C) Akhmedova asked the British East West Center staff how they managed to work in places such as Belarus and Armenia, where there is an entirely different political, legislative, and social context from Britain. British East West Center staff responded that the human rights law training they provide could be done in balance with systems of government and civil society, and it could also be applicable to and adapted for Turkmenistan's reality. Akhmedova asked for more information on the Independent Police Complaints Commission and expressed a willingness to explore opportunities for cooperation between the Commission and the Turkmenistan Commission of Handling Citizens' Complaints. She also expressed interest in inviting speakers from the Office of the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman to Turkmenistan to run two-day workshops on the work of their office.

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COMMITMENT TO LEGAL REFORM

15. (C) Akhmedova said the Turkmenistan government was committed to reforming the legal system. They also want to improve legal training. They are in favor of educational exchanges so that countries better understand each other and foster dialogue. Akhmedova said she was impressed by the fact that UK domestic legislation is interwoven and implements Britain's international obligations. She was also inspired by her prison visit and noted that institutionally, prison management has recently been split between the Home Office and the Ministry of Justice. She conceded that prison reform was desperately needed in Turkmenistan and said more study visits could be useful. Akhmedova suggested that Turkmen experts working on the revision of the Penal Code come to the UK to meet with Prison Service officials and that those officials could visit Turkmenistan to share their experience with Turkmenistan counterparts. The delegation expressed a special interest in using rehabilitation to reduce crime as well as improving educational and work skills and promoting law-abiding behavior to those in custody and after release. The delegation proposed that a London Metropolitan University law professor visit Turkmenistan to run courses on International Law for the new International Relations Institute (opening in September), Turkmen State University, the Military Academy, the Police Academy, and practicing lawyers and judges.

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

16. (C) During a session on freedom of religion and belief, Akhmedova expressed surprise that the UK does not require religious groups to be registered on the basis of religious belief. She insisted that in Turkmenistan registration was necessary to ensure the safety of the religious communities. She explained that, as a secular state, Turkmenistan's education system is devoid of religious instruction. The delegation mentioned that they took issue with the Jehovah's Witnesses refusal to permit blood transfusions and their proselytizing activities. Akhmedova said the government is introducing an ambitious review of existing religion law in Turkmenistan and is considering offering alternatives to conscription for conscientious objectors.

FOLLOW-UP

¶7. (C) Akhmedova said that Turkmenistan would continue to engage with the EU and other multilateral bodies on human rights issues. Reforming the legal system and introducing a new civil legal code would be part of the follow-up to the recent EU-Turkmenistan human rights dialogue. Turkmenistan wanted a sound legal basis upon which to implement practical reforms. Akhmedova promised to hold a roundtable in Ashgabat on some of the things learned during the visit. She also said she would likely make a number of recommendations to ministers based on UK best practices.

¶8. (C) COMMENT: According to the report, Akhmedova found the trip to London to be very useful for efforts to promote reform and human rights in Turkmenistan. Post would like to get Akhmedova to the United States to have similarly useful meetings. She has expressed interest in such a trip. The trick will be able to find time in her already extremely busy schedule. It will nonetheless be worth it. She is one of the most forward-leaning officials in Turkmenistan's leadership, and the president has given her a broad mandate to bring the country up to international standards in human rights. Moreover, rule of law is an area where the United States has great expertise, and where we could usefully help advance reforms in this country. END COMMENT.
CURRAN